
Anita Desai: the Master of Characters and Conflicts

Maninder Kaur

Assistant Professor, Deptt. of English, SUSPUCC, Guruharsahai.

Received: December 05, 2018

Accepted: January 14, 2019

ABSTRACT:

Key Words:

Anita Desai, undoubtedly, occupies a supreme position of the contemporary Indian Feminist novelist. With her poignant, hypersensitive knowledge, erudition and inner psychological power concerning the natural and real everyday affairs of familial, societal, economic dealings as minutely impacted in her major novels. Her novels symbolize the universal feminism.

Through her novels, Desai has unveiled the grim as well as mysterious truth of human psychology, especially women's questions in most of her novels of our postmodern era. As a self-conscious social critic and reformer, Desai has divulged the unnoticed images of the inferior and hatred feminine community of her age. Feminism is one of the top most issues of her fictional world; she has pictured a paradigm of the whole women community with a view to spreading the message of the second sex. She has dealt her fiction with feminine sensationalism and vivid themes which are innovative and potential concerning the miserable, drudgery plight of the weaker working class of women's untold affliction, agony, and psychological, conflicting senses under the unconscious and unwise, inconsiderate husbands, fathers, and brothers. Desai has wanted to highlight the matriarchal struggle, self-freedom, and self-identity and self-power against the male dominated world, where she has universalized the feminist message with the inner gaze. Though Desai attempts to analyze women's sensationalism and vivid expressionism in the field of fictional world, however, she has no willingness to sense herself as self-conscious feminist writer.

Anita Desai, in her psychological novels, focuses on the minute and subtle images of a tormented, tortured, toiled, trodden and self-frustrated feminism preoccupied with her inner heart, soul and mind, her sulking depression, melancholy, pessimism, self-storming pragmatics surrounding the atmosphere of mankind. The existential predicament of female world contradicts the masculinity. Though her female protagonists or femme fatale figures, Desai makes a fervent appeal and plea for a radiant dawn for the whole female community. The novelist discusses the vivid and clear cut problematic features of temperamental incompatibility, conjugal chaotic and conflicting dilemmas and ever growing hatred and despised disparity between male and female. In her novels, most protagonists cum heroines are segmented and alienated from the world, society, family, parents, and even from their own selves, because they are not average people but individuals who hardly enable to cope with the patriarchy, unable to keep abreast with this setup, rather they drift into their own sequestered world where they spin their great expectations, ambitions, dreams, which automatically disappears in the realm of oblivion.

Her art of feminine characterizations are superb but who are haunted by a peculiar acute concept and judgments of doom, withdraw themselves into an imaginative world of their own, get hysterical, neurotic, self-agitated and unhappy mood changed. A prick into the mystical crusts of the psychology of the female protagonists of Anita Desai upholds the universal emptiness, conventional alienation and solitude and an abysmal segregation from which they are victim of mental agony and pang of tormenting psychology. Her feminist superb creations are adamant and eccentric towards the male dominated order and system. They silently rebel and take recourse to naturalism and realism socially and economically—a world of their own, a world where they can be able to confirm their determination, affirmation and freewill. Femininity and womanhood are not bounded by social contracts. Her tale and novel are presented through the feminine sensibility and pragmatic sense. Desai aims to examine the natural, social and fanciful bonds that unchain the women's issues and in this way she is concerned with the destiny of the house minded woman in the typical Indian society of the postmodern period. The theme of the martial unhappiness and sorrowful heart and an unadjusted marriage-bond cause depression and alienation in the mind of women as impacted in her popular novels.

Anita Desai undoubtedly holds a prominent position among the contemporary writers of Indo – Anglican fiction. She is a bold and experimental novelist with a new sense and vibrant richness. Much attention is given to the emotional crisis of her protagonists who live in a chaotic society. She delves deep to find out the factors responsible for such a despair and attempts to suggest solutions to overcome it. From her novels, it is clear that she, possesses one of the healthiest and psychologically most balanced minds in the realm of Indo – Anglican fiction and the sanity of her tastes and attitudes, is almost exemplary, a point worth emulation for her fellow religionists in the field of writing.

As a woman writer she does not profess to be a feminist and yet she voices the fears and concerns, the hopes and aspirations of her characters in her own artistic way. She is deeply fascinated in exploring the social structure through the central characters in her novels. She is a minute observer of the society existing around her, perceiving everything minutely and delicately so that the situations can be presented in a poetic style. Anita Desai differs from other Indian novelists such as R K Narayan , Mulkraj Anand , Bhabani Battacharya, Raja Rao in her set of language and style that she employs to portray the inner crisis and tension existing in the life of a character.

Focusing on Anita Desai's novels, the interlocking themes that emerge are women's suffering and women's struggle for emancipation and autonomy in patriarchal society and culture. The reading perspectives opened up by feminist discourses enabled me to discern the text of the patriarchal control and its extraction of women's subservience. Desai's work does not rehearse traditional portrayals of women pleased to fulfill the roles expected of them by patriarchy both in the household and the public domain. Through the use of third person narration and the stream of consciousness that portray the subconscious feelings of her female characters, we see their state of oppression, suppression and self-determination in the traditional Indian community.

In almost all her novels we see women are dislocated and displaced in the society and various attempts have been made by them to escape from the undesirable experiences they mostly encounter in the domestic sphere. By analyzing their experiences in the domestic sphere and the public sphere, we find that Desai's women are subjected to varying degree of oppression and suppression. By reading the outcome of these women characters' struggle for independence, we observe that most of them have experienced various degree of self-determination but they are also haunted by the past memories and are isolated from the community. Thus, most of them are not able to achieve full liberation through their struggle against the dominant males.

Besides, the roles and identity that the women characters in Desai's novels take are mostly defined by traditional values and societal structures upheld by Indian men. The women are confined to some social space because of a perceived threat from men like what Ila Das has experienced in *Fire on the Mountain*. This echoes what Mossey has argued that 'it's not just that the spatial is socially constructed; the social is spatially constructed.' It illustrates that space is constructed by social relations, that is to say, the way in which social groups operate and interact in everyday relations. Men in these patriarchal societies play the role as the economic supporter to the family and they dominate the public sphere, while women's role is limited to domestic work and looking after the family members so they are positioned in the domestic sphere. Thus, the spatial boundaries between the public and private spheres are constructed by social factors. The different spheres also show power relations between the two sexes and genders. By reading her novels, we can see that most of Desai's characters are powerless not only in the public sphere but also the domestic sphere where their autonomous existence is dominated by either the parents or the husbands.

All the novels represent a continuity of women's subjection in the patriarchal society and the humiliation and suffering they have to undergo because of their confinement in the domestic sphere. The traditional values in the society can be more or less blamed for such injustice towards women that limit their spatial movement from the domestic sphere to the public sphere. But it is also true that some women's belief in these traditional values have also directly resulted in their subordination. In some cases, women themselves should be held responsible for abiding to the traditional value system that hinders them to achieve self-determination. As claimed by one of the critics, 'Devotion to the husband is cultivated among girls of all religions, but it is particularly idealized and firmly institutionalized in the Hindu concept of pativarata. The term pativarata connotes a wife who has accepted service and devotion to the husband, and his family, as her ultimate religion and duty.' The critic also observes that even educated women follow the ritual of commemorating Savitri who devotes fully to her husband. Thus, believing in traditional values by women has also promoted their subjection in the community.

Desai's novels also portray the married women's lives, and while some dominate over their husbands in the domestic sphere or are able to achieve self-determination, most of the others are entrapped, exploited, and oppressed. Still for others, their marriage has led them to suffer from humiliation and physical destruction.

Desai's novels can be seen as exposing the unequal relations between the two sexes; they also challenge men's domination and suggest a deconstruction of the patriarchal system. And yet, as Fawzia Afzal Khan observes, most of Desai's female characters choose the mythic mode, that signifies a retreat, an escape from the pressures and responsibilities of everyday existence over the realist mode that concerns itself with portraying everyday "real" life problems of people about survival and achieving a balance between individual desire and communal responsibility. It is because as women, they have too much responsibility and very little liberty within the realist mode of Indian life. From another point of view, it can be argued that Desai's characters are 'realist' in the sense that they are fully aware that in order to achieve a limited scope for autonomous action and agency, they need to seek accommodation with prevalent ideological systems, and arrive at an understanding of community responsibility that can supersede gender conflict and their own isolation.

Feminist writers like Desai have tried to expose the conflicts that arise when women try to struggle for independence and self-determination. In order to achieve equality and resolve tension between the genders, the traditional ideological systems that deprive women of their rights should be reviewed. The society's attitudes towards women that privilege their existence as wife, mother and daughter need to be changed. Women should have the right to determine their own lives. They should have opportunities to achieve independent social and economic existence both in the public and private domains if equality is to be achieved in society.

Anita Desai is one of those few Indian novelists in English who have tried to understand closely the predicament of their female characters. She herself contributes psychic novels, which she narrates as "purely subjective." She rightly analyses her psychological feelings in the following:

It has been my personal luck that my temperament and circumstances have combined to give me the shelter, privacy and solitude required for the writing of such novels, there by avoiding problems a more objective writer has to deal with since he depends upon observation rather than a private vision.

Her forte is the quest of sensibility and her writing expose inner realities and psychic echoes of her characters. The most recurrent themes in all her novels are "the hazards and complexities of man-woman relationships, the founding and nurturing of individuality and the establishing of individualism"² of her characters. She is interested in peculiar and eccentric characters rather than everyday, average ones. She presents the plight of introspective, hypersensitive women in her novels. Her each work is an accelerating exploration of the psychics self.

Mrs. Desai discovers its principles suitable to her themes. "Aspects of Existentialism" are in evidence in the total framework of her stories. It lays stress on the alienation of man from an absurd world, his following estrangement from normal society, and his recognition of the world as negative and meaningless presents the sensitive, individual, fragmented and spirituality destroyed by the particular social conditions of life, a life complex enough to make him obsessed. This particular aspect of Existentialism, the one alone, the man has no record, this kind of characters are appears to be a favorite subject of Desai.

The 20th century has been rightly called "The Age of Alienation". It is not something unique, but is indeed a characteristic of the society of our time. These days many persons feel alone. They are not capable of communicating with others. This problem of an individual who feels emotionally and spiritually alone forms the backbone of Desai's themes in each of her novels. According to one of the writers:

In her novels, the moral values of women are conveniently altered to suit the demands of men who treat them as their "objects", "possession" to be ruled and controlled by psychological insecurity nurtured in them through myths, customs and social discourse."

The novelist's recurring themes reveal the meaningful correlations between the psychic conditions of the characters. Mrs. Desai is primarily concerned with the fate of married woman in Indian society today. In her novels women become victims of the traditional modes of existence without a strong terra firma, which makes them intensely conscious of their lack of identity. Their protest mostly turns into frustration, for as an Indian girl a woman is brought up to be passive, meek and obedient. In contrast to the agonized women characters the critic has remarked that:

The male characters are shown as free moving but their movement is always on the periphery. If they are placed within the female space they are shown as threatening presence.

Thus, the principle male characters in her some novels play a negative role in the relations with female. The fictional world of Anita Desai is located in the corridor of human consciousness. She is almost obsessively concerned with the dark, uncannily oppressive inner world of her intensely introvert characters on the merge of psychological breakdown. They are alienated from the world, the society and the family around

them because they fail to meet the challenges of life. Their inability to face life forces them to regress to their childhood world of fantasy.

Modern women identify with the heroines because they find themselves in a similar situation, facing the same problem of identity, loss of values and meaninglessness in life. Anita Desai seriously examines, with the consciousness of woman, the effect of the accepted social norms in the life and position of a woman, who is considered merely a drawing-room decoration piece or domesticated animal. The search for understanding and sympathy with the woman, whose life without the support of man means losing safety, happiness, comfort and dignity. And that is the central point in Anita Desai's fictional world.

Indo-English writer is constantly concerned with the problem of interaction between man and woman, between the individuals and the social world. Her main concern is to depict the psychic states of her protagonists at some crucial juncture of their lives. Therefore, the most recurrent themes in her novels are "The hazards and complexities of man-woman relationships, the founding of individuality and the establishing of individualism of her characters".

Anita Desai is a modern indo-English writer, widely acclaimed, not only in India but also in the world of fiction writing. She emerged on the literary horizon after independence, focusing on the contemporary issues. Anita Desai has added a new dimension to the contemporary Indian English fiction. She has secured a unique and significant place due to her innovative thematic concerns and deals in her fiction with feminine sensibility. Her preoccupation is explored of deep psych of her characters.

The fiction of Anita Desai is relevant to all times because she writes about the predicament of modern man. She digs in to man inner psych and goes beyond the skin and the flesh. Literature for her is not a means of escaping reality but an exploration and an inquiry. She prefers the private to the public world and avoid from the traditional grooves of external reality and physical world. In fact, her real concern is the exploration of human psyche, inner climate, and she unravels the mystery of the inner life of her characters.

Thus, the most common themes in her novels is the complexity of human relationships, particularly the man-woman relationship. She writes mostly about the miserable plight of women suffering under their insensitive and inconsiderate husbands, fathers and brothers. So man-woman relationship brings characters into alienation, withdrawal, loneliness, isolation and lack of communication that frequently occurs in her novels. Most of her novel's protagonists are alienated from the world, from society, from families, from parents and even from their own selves because they are not average people but individuals. When these characters have to face alienation, they become rebels.

Tension, worries, depression, disappointment, anxiety and fear become their lot and they lose their sense of sanity and mental poise, for example Maya in *Cry, the Peacock*, Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* and Nanda Kaul in *Fire on the Mountain*. Some characters like Monisha and Nanda Kaul are unable to reconcile to alienation and meet with a tragic end.

The uniqueness of Anita Desai's fiction lies in her treatment of feminine sensibility. In India where women have redesigned role, which does not allow any room for individualism, identity and assertion, Anita Desai talks of women who question the age old traditions and want to seek individual growth. They try to reassess the known in a new context and find a meaning in life. Desai suggests that a balance between the conventional, pre-set role of women and the contemporary issues has to be struck. Her female protagonists try to discover and rediscover meaningfulness in life through the known, the established. These characters are not normal but different from others. They do not find a proper channel of communication and thus become alienated and start brooding about their lives. All their wanderings and reflections finally bring them into new vistas of understanding, which they had formerly ignored or rejected. Most of her protagonists are alienated ones. She portrays her characters as individuals "facing single-handed, the ferocious assaults of existence." Characters in her novels are generally neurotic females, highly sensitive and engage with their dreams and imagination and alienated from their environments. They often differ in their opinion from others and embark on a long voyage of contemplation in order to find the meaning of their existence. That is why that they suffer of their relationships more than others do.

Anita Desai is considered as an inner psychological novelist as her prime concern is mingled with the nocturnal and nebulous atmosphere of the women's psyche. The motivations, the conscience and the psychic excitement and turbulent agitation of the storming psychology of the female community of their surroundings are dealt with the cardinal and exclusive incidences of Desai's oeuvre. A particular trace and trait in the women's characterization, a tragic downfall turns into a psychic malady making their mentality over neurotic and hysterical as Maya in *Cry, the Peacock* who suffers from the father-fixation. Desai's fictions are auto-biographical, in the sense they impact her silent temperament. Anita Desai pictures the glaring portrayal of the women's quests by fostering out the profound and deeper universe of her powerful

protagonists. Anita Desai is magnified with the comprehensibility and intelligibility which brightens her aestheticism through her novel-worlds. Desai's characters belong to the affluent sections or Indian society they hardly realistically and comprehensively have to tackle the pragmatism of struggle of life for survival and existence. Desai writes regarding the classified characters because she senses them with an acute knowledge and sagacity.

Works Cited:

1. Dhawan, R.K. *The Fiction of Anita Desai*. New Delhi: Bahri Publications, 1989.
2. Fawzia Afzal Khan. *Cultural Imperialism and the Indo-English Novel: Genre and Ideology in R. K. Narayan, Anita Desai, Kamala Markandaya, and Salman Rushdie*. Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007.
3. Pabby, D.K. and Bala, Suman. *The Fiction of Anita Desai*. New Delhi: Khosla Publishing House, 2002.
4. Parmar, Virender. *Women in the Novels of Anita Desai*. Jalandhar: ABS Publications, 1999.
5. Prasad, Amar N. *Critical Response to Indian Fiction in English*. New Delhi: Atlantic, 2001.
6. Rani, Usha. *Psychological Conflict in the Novels of Anita Desai*. New Delhi: Abhishek Publications, 2002
7. Rao, B. Ramchandra. *The Novels of Mrs. Anita Desai* New Delhi: Kalyani Publishers, 1977
8. Singh, Sushila. *Feminism: Theory, Criticism, Analysis*. New Delhi: Pencraft, 2004
9. Tandon, Neeru. *Anita Desai and Her Fictional World*. New Delhi: Atlantic, 2008.